

Rules of Engagement:
Eating Humble Pie, As Served
by the Airline Pilots
(And Dealing with the Current Airline Crisis)
by J.J. Johnson - Editor & Chief of Sierra Times 09.25.01

As many of you know, we stated publicly that we refuse to fly any U.S. Domestic Airline until they allowed qualified passengers to be armed in the event of nutcases attempting to turn a pleasant air trip into a cruise missile. As much as I'm strongly in favor of the right of citizens to keep and bear arms, I reluctantly have to back off that statement. Of course, some people will hate it, but let me explain.

Officials with the Air Line Pilots Association say pilots have no choice but to arm themselves to maintain security in the sky. This hit the wires Monday. Last Week, ALPA's president, Capt. Duane Woerth stated "I have given the [ALPA Security] Task Force a mandate that all airport and flight security initiatives and improvements are to be fully considered. Nothing is, or should be, ruled out!"

The union has already sought an increase in the number of available federal air marshals who would travel among passengers on commercial flights, but say that this is insufficient. There aren't enough marshals to travel on every scheduled flight. As you know, we have stated that previously. at Sierra Times. In fact, there was testimony on this matter last week in Congress.

It was a conversation with John Mazor, media representative for the Air Line Pilots Association ALPA, that made me take another look at armed passengers on planes. I also spoke to other pilots on the condition of anonymity. Mazor, by the way, did not give me the impression that he was anti-gun. In fact, just the opposite. He did say the pilot's union had "all the cards on the table".

Two words, folks: Air Rage. It's something most air travelers have not seen, but I've have seen at least once. Mazor stated, "a passenger going through air rage with a loaded weapon may only add to the danger in such situations". He's right. But there's more that many of the readers may not understand. It's called "Maritime Law".

Under maritime law, the applied rule among international (and to a degree domestic) fights, is that the captain is in charge of the transport vessel - period. If the captain does not want his passengers (read: cargo) armed, he has the right to make that call for the safe passage of the remaining cargo or passengers. On any vessel, it is ultimately the Captain who must make the rules for safe travel. At least - that's the way it should be.

Under these Maritime Rules, this was in part what led to the Black Tuesday disasters. The captains of these craft should not have allowed anyone else to take control of the craft. The reason it happened is partly because of the old guidelines for how to deal with hijackers.

Mazor said, "Most hijackers had some kind of agenda, but in all cases, they wanted the plane to land somewhere. Pilots were instructed to get the plane on the ground safely, then let the hijacker reap the fruits of his labor." This protocol of course, changed on Black Tuesday.

Hindsight is, of course, 20/20 and like war pilots discussions and briefings after a aerial dogfight, civilian aviators are discussing among themselves how to deal with hijackers the next time.

And make no mistake - September 11, 2001 was nothing less than an aerial dogfight, and our side got only one out of four, while grounding the other potential dogfights that were to happen. For reasons that are obvious, some of the concepts cannot be discussed publicly to prevent compromising countermeasures against such air assaults. In a general sense, there are immediate actions that can be taken with the plane to disorient the potential hijack that could be effective. You may lose your lunch, but at least you'd land safely on a runway.

As a person who has taken flight lessons, I can say that it is important that the person in charge of the aircraft has knowledge and complete control of all the tools at his disposal in case of any emergency. This would include armed personnel.

And so, the captain of the aircraft - not me - must call the shots, no pun intended. To the pilots of America - my apologies and hats off to you.

This won't fly with many people, who will say even an armed pilot isn't enough. We want to be armed in case that pilot gets neutralized in an on-board dogfight. How can we trust a pilot to take the right action?

It's something that broke my fear of flying long ago. The principle that "No matter what happens, if something goes wrong the pilot wants to land safely as much as everyone else." This is where you have to trust the captain (and his assistant flying the plane). They don't want to get slammed into skyscrapers either.

The presentation to congress made by the Pilots union represents (again) the art of 'unconventional' thinking. Another good example was the Pilot of UAL flight 564 leaving Denver in which the pilot (captain of the vessel) stated:

"I want to thank you brave folks for coming out today. We don't have any new instructions from the federal government, so from now on we're on our own."

"Sometimes a potential hijacker will announce that he has a bomb. There are no bombs on this aircraft and if someone were to get up and make that claim, don't believe him.

"If someone were to stand up, brandish something such as a plastic knife and say 'This is a hijacking' or words to that effect here is what you should do: Every one of you should stand up and immediately throw things at that person - pillows, books, magazines, eyeglasses, shoes -anything that will throw him off balance and distract his attention. If he has a confederate or two, do the same with them. Most important: get a blanket over him, then wrestle him to floor and keep him there. We'll land the plane at the nearest airport and the authorities will take it from there."

"Remember, there will be one of him and maybe a few confederates, but there are 200 of you. You can overwhelm them.

"The Declaration of Independence says 'We, the people' and that's just what it is when we're up in the air: we, the people, vs. would-be terrorists. I don't think we are going to have any such problem today or tomorrow or for a while, but some time down the road, it is going to happen again and I want you to know what to do.

"Now, since we're a family for the new few hours, I'll ask you to turn to the person next to you, introduce yourself, tell them a little about yourself and ask them to do the same."

Peter Hannaford - Washington Times 09.19.01

This is unconventional thinking for an unconventional war. More so, it's an American way of thinking in times of war, and a damn good one anytime. Look at the situation, and deal with it accordingly - and damn the federal guidelines. Adapt, improvise and overcome. Sound familiar?

Now, if only we can get the federal government to listen to the people (the bosses) a little better. The pilot (the Captain of the Vessel) says that he and his crew should be armed. Of course, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) says no. They know better. In my opinion, the pilots should now tell the FAA bosses to fly all the planes themselves - and live by their own rules. This ongoing divide between the government and the private citizen will only cause more disasters. This is War. These pilots are front line soldiers. It is criminal- albeit treasonous, to disarm them at a time of war.

It will take a while to get people back in the air flying again, but not because of air safety. I spoke to an airline ticket agent over the phone about this problem. They didn't want their name used.

"I think people understand that we have all taken security measures more seriously, and it's doubtful that what happened on September 11 will happen again anytime soon. What people ARE afraid of is being caught far away from home if and when the next attack comes. If flights are grounded again, it'll be another nightmare like [Black Tuesday]". Yes, we know we are free to roam the country. But we want to be free of attack as well. That will take a sound defense where everyone is included."

So bailouts alone won't work. Air Marshals alone won't work. Calling 911 alone won't work. The flying public (and everyone else) has to be convinced that the nation as a whole is more secure. When it comes to "Homeland Security", there are about 250 million soldiers (including pilots) ready to sign up. Washington has to stop thinking the conventional thinking of Washington, and at least open up the beltway for other voices to come in. National ID cards, roving wire taps, and e-mail snooping only makes us weaker as a free people. After all, we're supposed to be fighting for Liberty, aren't we?

After September 11, 2001, the policy of "separation of church and state" vanished when the nation - all of us - called out for it. It was the right first step. We all prayed together - government and private citizen alike. In order to win this war, our government will have to understand that we must do more than pray together. We must work together. We must fight together. The greatest weapon at our disposal, and the greatest strategy of "Homeland Security", is to return to a government Of the People, For the People and By the People.

This is Reality. This is War. These are the Rules of Engagement.

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